

OPINION PAGE IN IRISH TIMES

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF CHRISTMAS: IS IT CREDIBLE?

The account of a birth in Bethlehem is not historical but rather is a theological story presenting an understanding of Jesus in the light of beliefs that arose after his death, writes Andrew Furlong

I have to admit to you that I am only just hanging on to the religion of my upbringing and priesthood - one foot in and one foot out! How so?

It's because of the two extraordinary beliefs underlying the astonishing Christmas story, and I no longer think that they are credible.

The first is the idea of a community chosen by God to be his favoured people and the second concerns his intervention to restore their fortunes. What do the churches think of these ideas? I have to say that another year is almost over and the churches are still struggling to face up to the awkward, but ultimately empowering, insights of modern scholarship.

Although the date of Jesus's birthday is not known, Christmas has been celebrated, for ages, as the birthday of the founder of Christianity, whose adherents claim that it is different from all other faiths - with its doctrines of God made man (the incarnation) and of the birth of the son of God (the world's saviour), though whether to interpret these doctrines literally or metaphorically is still debated. In fact, it's irrelevant.

The idea of being chosen by God to be a special people goes back many centuries before Jesus was born and is a central idea in Jewish thinking. Most Christians know the story of David and Goliath who both believed that there were many gods, with each one loyal to a particular tribe chosen by it to be its favoured people. In war it would fight alongside it. It was not recognised then that the so-called choices made by the gods were of human invention.

Some centuries later Israel's thinkers ceased to believe in a multitude of

gods. It made better sense, they argued, to believe in one Creator God. However, the catastrophic mistake which they made was to think that this Creator God was like the old gods in having one tribe it particularly supported and protected.

In their minds the chosen people of the Creator God could be none other than their own Jewish community. They didn't recognise that, if he was a God of love, it hardly made sense to suggest he had favourites.

As a small nation, Israel was constantly overrun by more powerful ones, but it never let go of its desire to be independent. This led some of its visionaries to dream of a time when God would intervene in the world to restore its fortunes, something that realistically it could not expect to do alone. These visionaries felt that it was reasonable to believe that, if they were the chosen people of God, he was bound to come to their aid, so that they would be oppressed no more.

In the lifetime of Jesus the members of the Essene community had withdrawn to live beside the Dead Sea. They were preparing themselves spiritually for life in this new kingdom which they believed was about to be miraculously created. Other fervent believers, like John the Baptist, lived with similar expectations. None of them were aware that their ancestors' ideas were delusions.

Jesus also shared these mistaken beliefs. The agent appearing in the vision in the book of Daniel, who would oversee the coming kingdom, is called the "Son of Man" in the gospels. In chapter 10 of St Matthew's gospel it recounts how Jesus sent his disciples on a mission to share his belief with fellow Jews of a kingdom about to transform their lives. The following words express what both he and his disciples believed: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of Man comes." (St Matt. 10.23).

This figure from the visionary's dream did not materialise. Nor did the transformation of Jewish life take place. There was no divine intervention, no defeat of their enemies and no new kingdom.

Despite this, even after Jesus's death, his disciples continued to hold on to their expectations of the dawning of a new day. They now claimed

that Jesus was the Son of Man - God's agent, who would come at any moment to judge the living and the dead in preparation for life for some in a wonderful kingdom. Before long, their human leader was being associated with heavenly powers - the powers of his office as Son of Man. The process towards his divinisation began.

Reflecting on Jesus's violent ending, through the lenses of Jewish ideas, they superimposed on his death a theological meaning - it had been an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Within decades, the ardent expectation of Jewish fortunes being restored in a kingdom, with Jerusalem at its centre, was replaced by the longing to become citizens of a heavenly Jerusalem.

Today, when we are much more conscious of theological thinking, like all our thinking, as being human in origin, what are we to make of these extraordinary Jewish and Christian beliefs?

The Christmas accounts of a birth in Bethlehem, of angels appearing to shepherds, of wise men guided by a star and of a flight to Egypt are not historical, but rather are theological stories presenting an understanding of Jesus in the light of beliefs that arose after his death.

Whether Jesus was proclaimed as the son of man or as the Messiah, both concepts relate to these deluded assumptions and expectations. Conflicts between Jews who accepted the claims being made about Jesus and those who didn't, led to Jesus's followers being driven out of the synagogues, and so to the beginning of a new religious movement. Only a minority of Jews and Christians realise this - and also that religions are transient.

Tomorrow's landscape will be shaped by new stories and myths seeking to address the perennial questions and to express the deep yearnings of the human spirit. They will empower people to live fuller lives and provide values-led change for the transformation of society and the world. In some ways they will grace our globe and no doubt in other ways disgrace it.

Are not religions one of the ways in which human beings express deep longings for good to triumph, peace to last, and joy to fill human lives?

That at least is part of the much-needed spirit of this season!

Andrew Furlong was dean of Clonmacnoise and is the author of *Tried for Heresy: A 21st Century Journey of Faith Philosophy and Theology* and studied *Contemporary Islamic Thought and Human Rights* at the Irish School of Ecumenics as part of an M. Phil degree in International Peace Studies. An advocate of reform in religions originating in a pre-scientific world, his stand in 2002 as Church of Ireland Dean of Clonmacnoise on the interface between modern scholarship and scriptures and dogma held to be divinely authorised cost him his job when his doctrinal views were considered unacceptable by his church. He is the author of *Tried for Heresy: A 21st Century Journey of Faith*.

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